

School Daze

I tried to change my old ways at a new school.



All art by Nelle McKay

that's what you want. The traditional public school system wasn't good enough for you so you sought out an alternative. You haven't been accepted yet, but you have made the first step."

Two weeks later I registered for classes. Unlike most schools, at City-As students get most of their credits through internships. For science credit, I started working at the Central Park Zoo.

By NATASHA SANTOS

So there I was on the train to visit City-As-School for the first time. From what I'd been told, it was an alternative school for people who don't feel comfortable in a traditional school setting. Translation: Some rinky-dink hole-in-the-wall manufactured to house academic misfits. But I was failing at my old school, so I didn't have much choice.

My mother's death, "growing pains," a creeping sense of failure and an inability to communicate what help I needed had all contributed to me not doing well in school.

In therapy, I was working out many of the painful feelings and events of my childhood that I'd tried to suppress for years. Dealing with awful feelings that I'd never dealt with before took its toll on my motivation and then my grades.

Sitting in the City-As auditorium, I told myself I was too smart for this. Sure I had failed, but I would do better. My mind began to change as I heard the assistant principal say something like, "It is your responsibility to take control of your education. We'll help you if

I found my classes and internships engaging. I also liked that teachers didn't give much homework. At my old school, Murrow, I never did my homework. But at the same time I felt—and still feel—that I hadn't made a transition to really feeling like I could succeed in school and that I was on the right path to adulthood.



Natasha Santos

When I signed up for the Transitions Workshop at *Represent*, I decided to focus on making that change. In the group, we tried specific activities (we called them "tools")

that we thought would help us make a transition in our lives, and we kept journals of our efforts. Here's my journal of my attempts to succeed in my new school and be in charge of my education and future.

Week 1

At Murrow, I didn't have too much trouble with the workload. My real problem was feeling disconnected—I felt like a loner.

When I first entered Murrow (as a sophomore, transferring from a smaller school) I wasn't brave enough to connect with other students. Then, as I felt more and more lonely, I didn't spend enough time actually at school to meet people. I've decided that at City-As I need to actually show up, and be brave enough to put myself out there. (Gulp.)

It's always been easier for me to connect with adults than with people my age, so for my first challenge, I decided to speak to teachers about the transition I am trying to make and ask their advice about how to succeed.

I loved this tool! I got nothing but positivity from my teachers. When I asked my social studies teacher how I was doing he said, "Great, you're one of the most involved and mature people in my class."

And my English teacher seemed enraptured by my work. It was a nice break from Murrow where I was constantly avoiding teachers because I had cut their class and had work due. Perhaps my family was right—I just needed to leave Murrow and start fresh to succeed.

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Week 2

One tool is to write letters to people you are or have been close to, even if you don't send them. I decided to write a letter to Murrow telling the school why I'm making this transition, and saying good-bye. I decided to keep my letter short and sweet because I didn't want to cry or shout or go completely crazy. I wrote:

Dear Murrow,

I came to Murrow to get what I had always wanted: a place where I was welcomed and academically challenged. I also had always wanted to feel connected to school and the people there (maybe because I felt so disconnected in my foster home).

School had never been a problem for me in the past. I would never have been voted Ms. Popular, but I knew who I was through my academics. I was an overachiever. People called me weird and unique and smart.

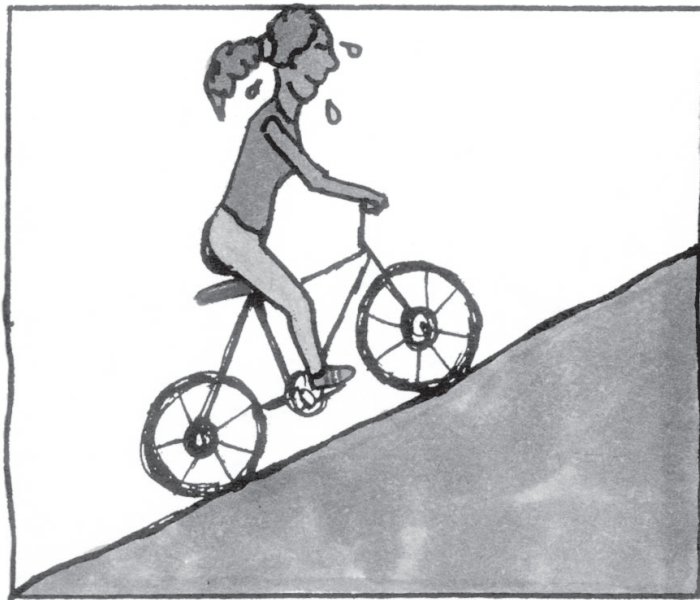
That has been part of my persona since elementary school. My home life was always crazy, so school was the place that anchored me to a reality that I wanted. All of this was possible as long as I stayed the smart, dependable student. No matter what else I may have been, I was always that.

When I started failing in Murrow I could no longer identify myself as the achiever and the smart one. Smart ones didn't fail classes. Overachievers achieved with ease. I was still the weird one, but even that took on a kind of melancholy tilt.

Now I am going to try to find a new me in a new school.

*Wish me luck,
Tasha*

I think writing the letter helped me understand more of what had happened. But when I looked back at it a few weeks later, I didn't feel released: I felt upset and disappointed in Murrow and



myself. I guess it was time to begin feeling some of the emotions I wouldn't let myself feel while I was still at Murrow.

Week 3

This week I decided to talk to some of the people who I thought were interesting and nice in my English class.

I expected it to be easy to work on my social skills and my feelings of belonging. But trying to make friends also brought up some feelings from my past that I didn't expect. In my other schools and foster homes I had always had trouble with fitting in and belonging. I was rejected by some of my former classmates and my former foster mother after I gave so much of myself.

Talking to my classmates, I noticed I was anxious about putting myself out there. I felt afraid that there was something wrong with me, something unlovable and unchangeable that made everyone run away and will make anyone new run away, too.

I did meet one guy named Jess who was real cool. He has blue hair and a constant nervous smile. He first caught my attention because he was good at math (I'm terrible at math). I decided to ask Jess for help (really I just copied his answers, but it was a start). Now that I've talked to him, I have someone to call about homework and maybe become friends with.

I feel pretty proud that I was brave enough to put myself out there and try to get to know someone.

Week 4

I decided to speak to three new people a day at my school. I thought that talking to people would be just like a ritual, and would become more and more comfortable. But it went terribly. I found out just how big of a coward I am about meeting people.

At best I would say, "Hi, how are you doing," to two people. At worst I would just smile and nod to everyone I saw.

I thought that I would become outgoing, the center of attention, just because I wanted to. I guess I'm more reserved than I knew. I feel pretty bad about the whole thing. I feel like I found out I am a big 'fraidy cat and that no one in my new school really wants to get to know me.

It reminded me of what happened at Murrow. Murrow seemed like the perfect climate for me at first. It was open and intellectual; there were hundreds of groups and cliques and tons of clubs to

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join. But instead of finding a way to join a single group, I became a loner and recluse. In a building with thousands of people, I was alone.

At other times, when I'd experienced this failure to connect, I'd never blamed it on myself. I'd blamed it on my foster mother, my social workers and the kids at my previous stupid narrow-minded school. But if it still happened in a place like Murrow, the only person I could really blame was myself, and that hurt. Trying to meet people at City-As, I wondered if it could happen again, and if something terrible was wrong with me.

After two weeks of trying, I decided I was putting myself out there more than I wanted to and it brought up too many old feelings of rejection that I don't want to deal with.

Week 5

In the *Represent* workshop this week, I didn't talk about how hard my last two weeks were, and how I felt like giving up. I don't think anyone noticed, but I felt bad after the meeting. I felt like I was lying in a place where everyone had agreed to be as open and honest as possible.

For my tool this week I decided not to try anything that would require interacting with new people. Instead, I chose to write in my diary about my school

life. It didn't go well. Some days I would open up my journal and think of all the things I should write, and other days I just would stare at it in its place on the headboard in my room.

In the end, I was too afraid to actually record what I had felt and experienced during the day. So I changed my tool. I took some time out each day to go bike riding. I've just learned to ride a bike (late bloomer) and I love this new ability of mine. While I'm riding I just have my thoughts and the feeling of riding through the wind. (Though I should also try to pay a *little* attention to the bike and the road—I fell off three times.) If I couldn't face my feelings, at least I could escape them.

I've always been afraid that I don't have what it takes to make any change, whatever it is.

Week 6

The workshop is almost over, so I decided to hold a "Congratulations on Our Successful Transitions" luncheon. I planned on inviting all the participants in the workshop.

I made out invitations, but then I realized that I didn't feel all that successful, so celebrating didn't feel honest to me. In fact, I was feeling even more like I was only faking my transition. I didn't even try to do my tools during the last two weeks.

Looking Back

Later, looking over my transitions diary, I realized that this pattern is familiar to me: I tend to come out strong, then get scared and back away. I've been trying to

be a person I'm not comfortable being and to enjoy experiences I can't really handle.

I realized that I want to take things slower, not expecting to make 10 new best friends in two weeks, but just to find one or two people to talk to about our classes, little things like that. I want to evaluate my goals and how to achieve them without overwhelming myself.

If I'm reasonable about what I expect from myself, I think I might accomplish much more. In fact, lately I've been feeling less overwhelmed and isolated at school. I'm participating in my classes, my grades are good, and I'm slowly meeting my classmates. I might

actually have some good experiences in high school after all.

Even though I don't yet feel connected to my school and fully responsible for my education and life, I think the transitions tools have helped me better understand the process of change.

Before, I saw changes as things that happen to you whether you're ready or not. I didn't see changes as opening up the possibility of internal development. And I've always been afraid that I don't have what it takes to make any change, whatever it is.

I realize now that my life will be a continuing cycle of transitions, and that the changes I need to make can help me grow, not leave me stuck further and further behind. I also see that I try to make changes happen too quickly. Now I see that I can slow down. That makes me feel more confident in my ability to evolve and grow. ■



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